DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 334 866 FL 800 365

AUTHOR	Spanos, George
TITLE	Cultural Considerations in Adult Literacy Education. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION	National Clearinghouse on Literacy Education, Washington, DC.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO	EDO-LE-91-01
PUB DATE	Apr 91
CONTRACT	RI89166001
NOTE	4p.
PUB TYPE	Information Analyses - ERIC Clearinghouse Products (071)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Adult Literacy; *Cultural Awareness; English (Second Language); Instructional Materials; *Literacy Education; *Native Language Instruction; Program Descriptions; Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS	ERIC Digests; Freire (Paulo)

ABSTRACT

The main themes of a broad interpretation of literacy are discussed in this digest, and examples of approaches to literacy education in use and resources are cited. The information presented is focused on native language literacy, but the themes, recommendations, and materials are relevant for adults of English as a Second Language. Specific sections highlight: (1) the role of culture in literacy; (2) incorporating culture into adult literacy classrooms (focusing on Freirean, participatory, and learner-centered approaches to literacy education; and (3) exemplary literacy education materials and programs. (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education) (VWL)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED334866

ERIC Digest

Cultural Considerations in Adult Literacy Education

By George Spanos
Arlington(Virginia School)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

FL 200 365

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

ERIC Digest

April 1991
EDO-LE-91-01

National Clearinghouse on Literacy Education

Cultural Considerations in Adult Literacy Education

by George Spanos,
Arlington (Virginia) Public Schools

In a culturally heterogeneous society, literacy ceases to be a characteristic inherent solely in the individual. It becomes an interactive process that is constantly redefined and renegotiated, as the individual transacts with the socioculturally fluid surroundings (B.M. Ferdman, 1990).

The term *literacy* may be interpreted narrowly, to focus strictly upon the basic mechanics of learning to read and write, or broadly, to recognize the role of cultural factors associated with language learning in different societies. A recent trend toward a broad interpretation recognizes culture and associated factors such as values, beliefs, attitudes, motivation, and cognitive styles as key aspects of literacy education.

In this digest, the main themes of a broad interpretation of literacy will be set forth, and examples of approaches in use and resources available will be cited. Although most of the literature is focused on native language literacy, the themes, recommendations, and materials are relevant for adults learning English as a second language as well.

The Role of Culture in Literacy

Scribner and Cole (1981) define literacy as "a set of cultural practices developed in and for different social contexts." Building on this definition, Reder (1990) argues that literacy is acquired in collaborative social contexts; literacy is a shared activity, not individual proficiency with particular skills. Social meanings and learning attitudes, in addition to functional skills, need to be considered in one's interpretation of what it means to be literate.

Likewise, Ferdman (1990) argues that literacy is framed and defined by the culture of the learner. One becomes literate when one has developed mastery of both the processes and the symbolic media of a particular culture, the ways in which cultural norms, values, and beliefs are represented. Thus, literacy is considerably more than the ability to read a printed or written page; it involves the ability to both comprehend and manipulate the symbols of that page in ways prescribed by a particular culture.

Further, Ferdman cautions that, "The value placed on behaviors that are construed as literate in the context of one group will not be equivalent to the value given them by a different culture." Thus, acquiring and maintaining literate behaviors in a new culture may not be easy, because basic values are not readily changed. The relative ease with which an individual acquires and maintains appropriate literate behaviors in a new culture relates closely to the similarities and dissimilarities between the native culture and the new culture.

For example, Fingeret (1989) warns against judging nonreading adults within the normative framework of the dominant, reading culture. She regards nonreading adults as members of primarily oral subcultures that are rooted in concrete experience and that place importance on talk. Talk requires consistent face-to-face interaction, follows different rules, and has greater practical value than it does in mainstream U.S. culture. The collaborative literacy practices of the Eskimo, Hispanic, and Hmong communities studied by Reder (1987) revealed a strong oral component and collective accomplishment of reading and writing tasks (p. 256).

Incorporating Culture into Adult Literacy Classrooms

According to Fingeret (1990), literacy programs tend to ignore the meanings that learners need to learn to express, choosing instead to teach either the employers' meanings (in the case of workplace literacy programs) or the schools' meanings (in the case of school-based programs). Thus, she makes a case for *participatory literacy education approaches* that recognize and respect the knowledge, skills, experiences, and aspirations of the students involved (1989). These approaches to literacy education have a strong active component (see Jurmo 1989a), requiring learners and teachers to engage in cross-cultural communication, negotiation, and mutual learning. Following are examples of these approaches:

- **Freirean approaches:** The influence of Paulo Freire is apparent in many programs and approaches that attempt to base literacy on the cultures and personal experiences of students (see Spener, 1990). The most prominent features of Freirean approaches are problem-posing (Freire, 1970, 1973; Wallerstein, 1983, 1984) and dialogue (Freire, 1973; Auerbach & Burgess, 1985). Dialogue is viewed as a relationship between the learner and the teacher in which the student contributes concrete cultural knowledge and the teacher contributes knowledge about reading and writing. The notion of dialogue is manifested in the ethnographic research of Heath (1980, 1983), Weinstein-Shr (in press), and Weinstein-Shr & Lewis (in press), as well as in the listening and observation techniques proposed by Wallerstein (1983). Problem-posing involves the use of cultural themes and open-ended questions that generate discussions drawing upon students' background knowledge, values, and aspirations. Students are thus given responsibility for defining real-life problems, discussing the causes of the problems, and proposing solutions based on their own experiences.

- **Participatory literacy education:** This program model (described in Fingeret & Jurmo, 1989) gives learners considerable control over decision making and program operations. The relationship between program staff and learners follows a Freirean

FL 800 365

CAL Center for Applied Linguistics • 1118 22nd St., NW • Washington, DC 20037 • (202)429-9292

orientation; that is, it is collaborative, and student characteristics, aspirations, backgrounds, and needs are placed at the center of the program. The model can give a framework within which a number of emphases can be developed, including family literacy (Auerbach, 1989; Wallerstein, 1984), community-based literacy (Añorve, 1989), the language experience approach (described for adults in Savage, 1984), the whole language approach (described for adults in Rigg, 1990), and learner-based courses.

• **Learner-centered literacy assessment:** Procedures for enabling learners to participate in their own literacy assessment are discussed in Lytle, Belzer, Schultz, and Vannozzi (1989). During assessment, learners are asked about such diverse topics as literacy practices and goals, reading and writing strategies, and personal interests. Proponents believe that these discussions enable students to become actively involved in their own learning.

Exemplary Materials and Programs

The following materials and programs exemplify a broad interpretation of literacy education.

Wallerstein's (1983) **Language and culture in conflict: Problem-posing in the ESL classroom** provides background information on the use of problem-posing in the ESL classroom, as well as examples of associated teaching techniques. Eight teaching units are provided along with suggestions for using the units and writing a curriculum based on problem-posing. There is an extensive list of resource and reference materials.

Long & Spiegel-Podnecky's (1988) **In print: Beginning literacy for cultural awareness** is intended for non-literate and semi-literate immigrant adults. The 15 units provide beginning literacy exercises aimed at helping students develop self-esteem, preserve their cultural experiences, and adjust to their new culture. A teacher's guide provides an introduction to the materials and the approach and gives notes for teaching each of the units.

Fingeret & Jurmo's (1989) **Participatory literacy education** contains case studies of exemplary participatory literacy education programs. The programs represented are: The Eastern Michigan University Academy; Literacy Volunteers of New York City; the Center for Literacy in Philadelphia; California Literacy; the Literacy Research Center at the University of Pennsylvania; the Adult Literacy Evaluation Project at the University of Pennsylvania; Literacy Volunteers of America (Syracuse, NY); and California State University's CALPEP Project. Information on these programs is also provided in Jurmo (1989b).

Acknowledgments

The author thanks the following for providing valuable information: Carol Clymer, Jodi Crandall, Marcia Farr, Hanna Fingeret, Doug Gilzow, Janet Isserlis, Don Ranard, Peggy Seufert-Bosco, and David Spener.

References

Añorve, R.L. (1989). Community-based literacy educators: Experts and catalysts for change. In H.A. Fingeret & P. Jurmo (Eds.), *Participatory literacy education* (pp. 35-41). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc.

Auerbach, E.R. (1989). Toward a social-contextual approach to family literacy. *Harvard Educational Review, 59*(2), 165-181.

Auerbach, E.R., & Burgess, D. (1985). The hidden curriculum of survival ESL. *TESOL Quarterly, 19*, 475-495.

Ferdman, B.M. (1990). Literacy and cultural diversity. *Harvard Educational Review*, 60(2), 181-204.

Fingeret, H.A. (1989). The social and historical context of participatory literacy education. In H.A. Fingeret & P. Jurmo (Eds.), *Participatory literacy education* (pp. 5-15). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 243 994)

Fingeret, H.A. (1990). Changing literacy instruction: Moving beyond the status quo. In F.P. Chisman and Associates, *Leadership for literacy: The agenda for the 1990's*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 323 819)

Fingeret, H.A., & Jurmo, P., (Eds.). (1989). *Participatory literacy education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc.

Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: The Continuum Publishing Corporation.

Freire, P. (1973). *Education for critical consciousness*. New York: Seabury Press.

Heath, S.B. (1980). The functions and uses of literacy. *Journal of Communication , 30*(1), 123-134.

Heath, S.B. (1983). *Ways with words: Language, life, and work in communities and classrooms*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Jurmo, P. (1989a). The case for participatory literacy education. In H.A. Fingeret & P. Jurmo (Eds.), *Participatory literacy education* (pp. 17-28). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc.

Jurmo, P. (1989b). History in the making: Key players in the creation of participatory alternatives. In H.A. Fingeret & P. Jurmo (Eds.), *Participatory literacy education* (pp. 73-80). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc.

Long, L.D., & Spiegel-Podnecky, J. (1988). *In print: Beginning literacy through cultural awareness*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

Lytle, S.L., Belzer, A., Schultz, K., & Vannozzi, M. (1989). Learner-centered literacy assessment: An evolving process. In H. A. Fingeret & P. Jurmo (Eds.), *Participatory literacy education* (pp. 53-64). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc.

Reder, S.M. (1987). Comparative aspects of functional literacy development: Three ethnic communities. In D. Wagner (Ed.), *The future of literacy in a changing world: Vol. 1*. Oxford: Pergamon Press.

Reder, S.M. (1990, March). *Literacy across languages and cultures*. Paper presented at the Third Gutenberg Conference, Ithaca, NY. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 318 279)

Rigg, P. (1990). Whole language in adult ESL programs. *ERIC/CLL News Bulletin, 13*(2),1,4-5,8.

Savage, K.L. (1984). *Teaching strategies for developing literacy skills in non-native speakers of English*. Unpublished manuscript. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 240 296)

Scribner, S., & Cole, M. (1981). *The psychology of literacy: A case study among the Vai*. Boston, MA: Harvard University Press.

Spener, D. (1990). *The Freirean approach to adult literacy education. Q&A*. Washington, DC: National Clearinghouse on Literacy Education, Center for Applied Linguistics. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 321 615)

Wallerstein, N. (1983). *Language and culture in conflict: Problem-posing in the ESL classroom*. Don Mills, Ontario: Addison-Wesley. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 221 043)

Wallerstein, N. (1984). *Literacy and minority language groups: Community literacy as method and goal*. Unpublished manuscript.(ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. 240 298)

Weinstein-Shr, G. (in press). Literacy and social process: A community in transition. In B. Street (Ed.), *Cross-cultural approaches to literacy*. Cambridge, England:Cambridge University Press. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 313 930)

Weinstein-Shr, G., & Lewis, N.E. (in press). Language, literacy and the older refugee in America: Research agenda for the 90s. *College ESL, 1* (1). (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 313 928)

Citations with an ED number may be obtained by calling the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS) at 1-800-443-3742.

The National Clearinghouse on Literacy Education (NCLE) is operated by the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL) with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under contract no. RI 89166001. The opinions expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of OERI or ED.

Printed on recycled paper.